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TRAINED RURAL YOUTH, THE HOPE OF THE PRESENT AND FUTURE

A radio talk by Erwin H. Shinn, Extension Service, U. S. D. A., delivered in the National 4-H Club program of the National Farm and Home Hour, Saturday, April 4, 1936, and broadcast by NBC and a network of 58 associated radio stations from coast to coast.

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Over half of the young people of the nation are rural young people. They are certainly one of the nation's chief assets. American farm families have, in the past, furnished much of the nation's leadership in all walks of life. The present decline in birthrate in towns and cities indicates that from our rural population must come a considerable number of the future leaders in the centers of population. Seeing to it that rural young people are well trained is important to the cities as well as to the open country.

The farm and the open country offer many advantages for the training of future leadership. Farm young people have the privilege of a close association with nature. They learn about life as it functions in the natural environment. They learn automatically the simple scientific principles of plant and animal growth. But perhaps best of all they learn to do by doing, by helping brother or sister, father or mother to carry on the farm or home work. These splendid opportunities for forming character and gaining skill come to farm youth daily in their home environment.

But there is another side to the question of educational opportunity for rural boys and girls. They have always been underprivileged in opportunities for formal school training.

The rural school terms are shorter than city school terms, the rural school districts cannot compete with the city schools for the services of the best-trained teachers; the farm family cannot so well afford to send children to high school and college as can the city family. The situation has grown worse in the past few years. The Federal Office of Education reports 1,745 rural districts in 25 States unable to support any school in 1934-35; 2,273 were able to support only one month; 2,792 were able to support only two months; and 4,762 were able to support only three months of school on their own resources.

This situation must be remedied if half the potential leadership of the future is to be well trained -- or trained at all in a formal sense.

However, my primary purpose today is to comment, not on this disturbing educational circumstance, but on the agencies which are functioning effectively in supplementing the formal rural school program. I mean such services as the 4-H club organization sponsored by the Federal and State extension systems. The clubs enrolled the past year some 950,000 rural boys and girls from 19 to 21 years of age. About one-third of them range in age from 15 to 21. In normal times the club enrollment increases from 5 to 10 percent each year.

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Another effective organization working with rural youth is the system of vocational education in agriculture and home economics in high schools, which is given Federal support under the Smith-Hughes Act. These schools enrolled during the past year over 600,000 farm boys and girls. They received systematic instruction in agriculture and home economics as a preparation for leadership in farm life. Many agricultural colleges are offering short courses of instruction to prepare rural boys and girls for farming, homemaking, and citizenship. Other agencies serving to help develop rural leadership are: The junior division of the National Grange, the Farm Bureau, and the Rural Scouts.

4-H club work is founded on sound principles of education. Club members learn both the theory and practice of farming and homemaking by carrying on farm and home work. Every club member must undertake a project or a demonstration in some phase of farm or home work. Under the supervision of the agricultural or home demonstration agent, every club member also learns the fundamental principles of health, and of the recreational, the social, the esthetic, the ethical, and the exploratory aspects of education.

Training in 4-H clubs has many values according to college students who were former club members. I recently made a study of educational objectives of 4-H club work. I interviewed college students in 14 States. Here are some of the points to which they give high values: They say that 4-H club work gave them a higher appreciation of nature and the farm home, and showed them how to derive greater satisfaction from farm life.

Other values they mentioned were: Opportunities to acquire knowledge of the theory of agriculture and homemaking and the use of the knowledge in solving farm and home problem; the opportunity to learn to do by doing, the acquirement of thrift habits, habits of cooperation, some of the values of scientific research, how to keep records, and a large percentage stated that club work had stimulated their interest in school work and had given them the desire to go to college. Other values of club work prominently mentioned were training in health, personal cleanliness and in various social and recreational activities.

A broad program of rural education along these lines is essential to the training of rural youth for good citizenship. One of the surest ways to improve economic and social conditions is to improve human beings. Education is the foundation and hope of democracy. Let me repeat that it is to the interest of everyone that rural boys and girls be adequately trained for their life work.

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